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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

When you receive this email, I should be just a handful of days away from my final sleep in the Boya Hills of South Sudan for this season of my life; another big transition awaits this month as I head back to the US. I have recently had to change my word choice from “going home” to “moving home” to help people here understand the sense of permanence with which I am going. It’s a hard balance knowing the possibility of returning, so the most truthful condolence I can give them and myself is that “aga Nyekuci”, God knows, the plans that lie ahead for me. With those thoughts in mind and set aside for a moment, let me update you on the past five weeks then add some few thoughts about what lies ahead.



While we were in Fara Sika, they were celebrating baptisms; it was beautiful.

As I begin writing this, I feel like I could write paragraphs and paragraphs (as I edit, I recognize that I did indeed write many paragraphs—hopefully good ones!) about these final weeks here and all that is happening in wrapping up. Most days are busy, and I have repeatedly found myself praying in surrender and trust to the Lord with all that needs to happen. Oh how faithful he has been. Divine intervention has been so clear over these last couple/few weeks. If not for God, not only would things not have happened as they have, but I am sure that anxiety, tiredness, and stress would mark these final days. Instead, there has been much peace, rest, and provision — much thanksgiving. So here are some headlines:

Visit to Fara Sika

A few weeks ago, I gave my driving skills a test as Dan, Noblesse, and I went with a few of our friends, Kileng, Paulo, Lowuyo, and Loluk, to Fara Sika, another area with Laarim people three hours South of here by car. It was not so many months ago that I had

overheard a conversation about a Kenyan missionary, Jacinta, who was ministering to the Laarim people in this other village, pronounced Keratheeka by the locals. While I had heard of this village, I was a bit shocked to have not known that she has been ministering there for the past 15 years and that there is another man named James who has also been out there for quite some time. The overnight trip was refreshing and encouraging as we enjoyed sweet fellowship and joined them for church on Sunday morning, not to mention the cooler weather and the abundance of food we were served.



In Fara Sika, from left to right: James, Lomana, Dan (front), Paulo, Kileng, Noblesse (front), me (front).

Christmas, “Kirithimen”

Dan and I read through an advent devotional that I found to be a beautiful and helpful reminder during what can seem to be a challenging Kirithimen season. Challenging in a variety of ways, but that’s how it was during the first Christmas too, I think. Belief in the face of impossibility, proclamation while others sat silent and unaware, revelation in the

midst of confusion, and joy in some ordinary events made special—divine. What a beautiful thing it is to celebrate the birth of Jesus a couple thousand years later. This man who is God, was God, and will forever be Lord of all.



In Camp 15, enjoying some fresh tamarind juice, from left to right, Dan, Kato, Lowuyo, and Loci.

A few days before Christmas, Dan, some friends of ours, and I took a day trip to Loriok, some 15 kilometers away, to buy some sugar and other sweets in preparation for welcoming the ~200 people (including women and children) that would end up at our house Christmas morning. While our sugar proved to be less than needed, our remaining lentil supply got us through the morning before we enjoyed some candy and set off for Kimatong where the priest from Loriok, Fr. Alfred, was holding a Christmas Day service. We returned home to the abundance of dirty dishes that needed washed before we went to our neighbors house to enjoy Christmas dinner. We got some sleep and in the morning joined together under the tree here in Kali for church. We sang,

prayed, danced, and heard the good news that continues to bring great joy for all the people; I must note that while sweet and beautiful, I reckon it was similar to Jesus' birthday: beautiful and sweet yet a bit chaotic and messy. After some final notes at church, we returned to our compound to share some juice and more candy with our neighbors and those who came from church. That night we played soccer as per usual for a Sunday, and the next day our team celebrated with worship, dinner, a movie, and of course some special treats for the holiday. In the midst of the busyness, serving, and much engagement with people that came in those few days, I was reminded of how "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart", reminded not just to treasure and ponder the things that were happening, but moreover, like Maria, to treasure and ponder the truth of this baby Jesus who came to save and reconcile the world, to bring his kingdom come.



This was the cooking set up on Christmas morning; we quickly realized we would need a second fire.

Wrapping Things Up, Miscellaneous Happenings

The rest of these past few weeks have really been focused on wrapping things up; there remain only a few unchecked boxes on my long checklist that has been taped to my desk for the past month and a half.

These weeks have been filled with showings of the Jesus Film at the homes where I have been taking Bible stories, Lokwamuru and Lotang, along with the regular gatherings at their homes that will conclude next week as I give them some solar radios that have Bible stories and songs on them.



The gathering this past week in Lokwamuru where I happily passed the musical responsibilities to Lowuyo, Kato, and Dan who joined me.

The week before Christmas was the final week of our ten-week short term discipleship group; we have been encouraged to see Kileng, Lowuyo, Kato, and Locii all stepping out in faith in one way or another in these past many weeks as well. Christmas morning

provided a space for us to join one another and some other guys from church in serving our neighbors. This past week, Dan and I cooked a meal for these guys to celebrate finishing the 10-weeks of curriculum and encourage them to continue growing and standing firm in the faith.

With some additional Bible story books printed, guys from church have been reading each week during our Sunday morning gatherings; while we were in Fara Sika, a handful of guys still gathered Sunday morning for time in God's word, worship, fellowship, and prayer. I want to shine light on the way Jesus has been raising up His church here (where last December a tree offered shade only to the rocks on the ground) and the reading of God's word among a people whose literacy rate remains below 5%.



The time during church for reading the word.

The other day, Kalifha shared about how God's word is "sweet like candy" during a time of encouragement we enjoyed with Noblesse, Kileng, and Dan at our house here in Kali.

Kalifha is a believer from Chawua who has been working really hard, even as a older man, to learn to read in order that he can read God's word. We were all grateful for this time of fellowship and encouragement before Noblesse, Dan, and I depart in the coming weeks.

A couple weeks ago, I sat down with Jacob, our team leader, to go over my end of term document which provided space to not only reflect on this past two year term but also, in talking it over with Jacob, to hear his feedback and encouragement. I was indeed encouraged by our time together, and I have received a warm welcome back from both him and my South Sudan unit leader for another term (seems like good info to pass along to you who have invested much into me!).



Sunrise or sunset? Surely, I'll miss some of the beauty out here next month.

What's Next?

While I plan to take off from Laarim on January 7th, I won't plan to arrive in Buffalo until January 21st, as I am attending a debriefing conference in Florida upon arrival. I will then enter into what people in the missions world (and other places) call furlough. While I'm not sure of the exact end date of this furlough period, within AIM, we are given a four month furlough following a two year term. Though I am not returning to Laarim at the end of four months, I still plan to use this time as a furlough in many ways, including resting, meeting with supporters, and preparing for the next transition of life. For me that will be marrying my incredible fiancée Katie and spending some time in the US. I trust AIM's organizational structure in evaluating four months to be a good amount of time for this season of transition, and I hope you would also trust that this would be an appropriate amount of time. I hope this can allow time for travel to visit many of you, speak when opportunities arise, and process this past season and prepare for what is ahead. I will note that Katie and I both have the desire to go back overseas to share the Gospel after we get married and, indeed, the Laarim is a place that could happen, but with so much unknown and the desire to prioritize starting our marriage well, that is about all that seems right to say at this point.

Here are a couple logistics that seem better as bullet points:

1. **Meetings and such:** While I want to hold off a bit (after Jan. 21) on filling my phone, inbox, and brain with logistics regarding individual meetings, I am happy to hear if you have any thoughts on things that would take more planning: speaking, an event, a group gathering, or even outstanding circumstances limiting your own schedule. I would love to use some of this time to speak or preach where opportunities arise, so please don't hesitate to reach out if you feel that could be worthwhile.

2. **Phone help:** As I prepare to come back to the US, I am hoping for your help in choosing or figuring out a good, low priced phone carrier. Would you please send me any information that could be helpful in getting started with a provider, even if that is just your plan details, so I can compare prices.

Let me close with the oh so fitting closing words of third John,
"I have much to write to you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face."

To the ends of the earth,

Joel

